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ABSTRACT

This publication outlines a process for developing, instituting, and maintaining school improvement in a systematic way. The seven steps in the process are to (1) identify the problems affecting student performance, (2) establish standards by which to measure the success of improvement efforts, (3) collect appropriate data, (4) analyze the data and set priorities for action, (5) generate solutions to the critical problems and establish an improvement plan, (6) implement the improvement plan, and (7) collect new data for evaluating program success. (PGD)

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BREAKING THE LOW PERFORMANCE CYCLE

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REACH

REALISTIC EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT CAN HAPPEN

EA 018 881

"Some of these kids are just not getting the education I wish they had. . . I'm not sure what the problem is. I guess it's just a combination of factors that we can't do anything about."

—high school principal

What's my school like? What difference does it make?

Where this principal has discerned only a problem, there is also opportunity—a chance to discard old notions of limitations and to stretch his understanding of the abilities of teachers and students to build a better educational program.

The principal may believe, for example, that the poor economy, or the disinterest of parents in the community, breeds poor student performance. Yet, students in other schools with the same characteristics perform much better. What makes the difference? Staff at the more successful schools take responsibility for increased student performance, rather than attribute poor results to factors beyond their control. Convinced that all students can succeed, they continually strive for improvement.

Perhaps this refusal to become complacent is the only prerequisite to breaking the cycle of poor achievement. But recent educational research also indicates schools that continue to improve, do so in a systematic way. A chart and explanation of the improvement process follow:

Identify problems

The first step toward improvement occurs when faculty, students, parents,or any group in the school, accept the existence of a problem. A campus identified as having the lowest TEAMS scores in the district undoubtedly motivates teachers to question why they in particular did so poorly. More importantly, they are motivated to examine those factors that most significantly influence poor student performance in their particular school.

Select measures of success

Measures of success or "outcome measures" refer to information that is useful to determine whether a program is working. TEAMS results, for example, help teachers determine whether they have corrected or solved specific problems. Depending on the problem, other measures of success could include:

- achievement test results
- number of students retained in grade
- number of students enrolled in honors courses
- types and salary range of jobs held by students after graduating
- parent and student satisfaction with the program
- attendance

Collect data

In this phase, staff develop and use measurement instruments to collect data on the problem. Various instruments could include:

- simple, random student record reviews
- student, parent, and teacher surveys, or
- classroom observation instruments

Analyze data and set priorities

When information is grouped and summarized, staff are able to review, discuss, and make sense of it. Their consensus of the most critical problems at their particular school marks the beginning of breaking the low performance cycle.

Generate solutions and an improvement plan

Consensus frees the staff to concentrate their efforts on one or two problem areas. For example, if the group determines that failing students frequently received little remedial assistance and seldom attended tutorials, they would consider the following solutions:

- individual attention—The teachers and principal, in private discussions with each student, emphasize the importance of improving grades.
- mastery teaching—Teachers give frequent mastery tests to see if each student understands concepts as they are being taught. Concepts are retaught, as needed.
- special in-school remediation—For students who don't understand concepts presented, the school provides: (1) tutorials, (2) additional staff in the classroom.

Implement improvement plan

During this phase, actual changes are made to the program. Simpler, less time-consuming solutions should be considered first. If the plan seems too ambitious for broadscale implementation, research suggests it is best to try it on a limited basis. In this way, staff can see how the idea works and will be encouraged to try more.

Collect new data

Staff should begin to collect some information that indicates how the program is progressing and make mid-course corrections to the program. Formative data useful in analyzing TEAMS might include:

- current test grades
- student, teacher, parent opinions of the program

Finally, summative evaluation is collected that indicates whether students have actually improved. The results will either renew improvement efforts or redirect the staff to new problems to be solved.

Conclusion

Research information describes the characteristics and practices associated with schools that succeed in improving student achievement. These ideas can be the catalyst for promoting discussion of instructional issues and, when integrated into a local action plan, significantly assist in improving local schools. School staff are advised to pursue appropriate practices by reviewing the research and consulting with evaluators with expertise in the field. Future technical assistance documents will focus on specific aspects of a program improvement plan.

Readings

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REACH

Volume I, Part 5 of 5

Texas Education Agency

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New curriculum rules adopted by the State Board of Education in June 1986 require districts to provide alternative strategies or programs that will help low-achieving students succeed in school. REACH is intended to provide technical assistance information to complement this new district responsibility. Booklets describing successful models of alternative approaches to learning will be distributed during the 1986-87 school year. For information about this publication, contact the Division of Exemplary Programs, Texas Education Agency, at (512) 463-9661.

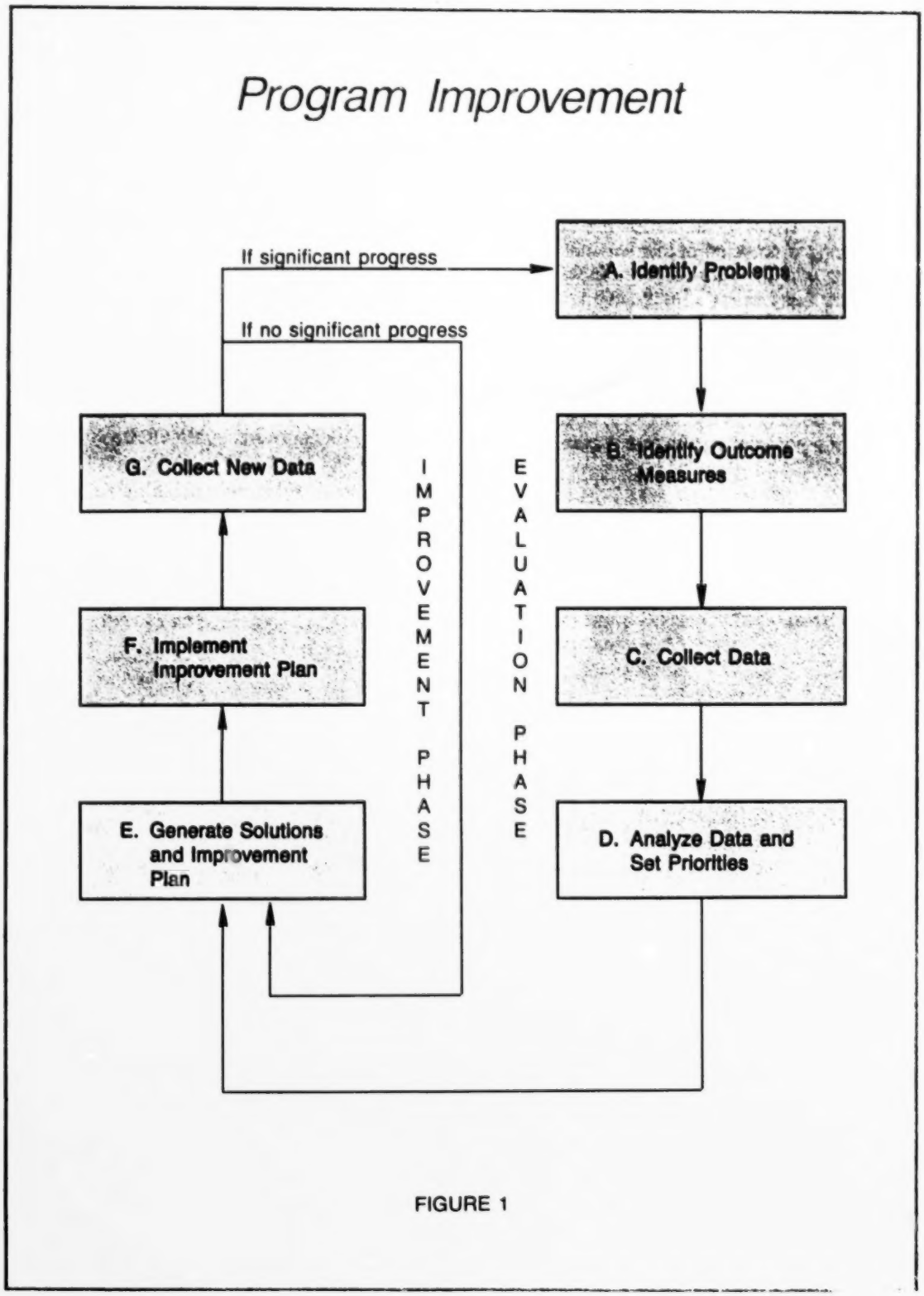
Program Improvement
If significant progress
If no significant progress
A. Identify Problems
B. Identify Outcome Measures
C. Collect Data
D. Analyze Data and Set Priorities
E. Generate Solutions and Improvement Plan
F. Implement Improvement Plan
G. Collect New Data
IMPROVEMENT PHASE
EVALUATION PHASE

FIGURE 1